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ABSTRACT

To many in the field of early care and education, back-up child care may be viewed as a stressful disruption that could interfere with attachment and be detrimental to continuity of care. This paper attempts to prove that high-quality back-up child care offered by employers actually fosters the development of resiliency in young children by providing them with a positive experience and opportunity to cope successfully when faced with a challenging disruption of their usual routine. The paper reviews research on resilience and the protective factors that help build this trait in children. The paper also discusses parents' positive responses in a survey about their children's resilience after spending time in back-up care. (Contains 11 references.) (EV)

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Back-Up Childcare: A Quality Alternative to Regular Care Which Fosters Resilience in Infants and Toddlers

Abstract

Many experts in the field of Early Care and Education question the appropriateness of infants and toddlers spending extended periods of time in day care. The purpose of this article is twofold: to raise an awareness in the field in regards to the need for quality primary and back-up care for young children and to show that back-up childcare actually fosters resilience in infants and toddlers. Research on resilience and the protective factors which help to build this trait in children is reviewed. Parents of children who have spent time in back-up care were surveyed and their responses have been included along with implications for the future.

Introduction

In a perfect world quality child care, which meets the needs of young children while at the same time takes into consideration the needs of working parents, would be available to all families. Unfortunately, that is not the case in our fast-paced, ever-changing world. However, a relatively new and promising alternative that some parents are lucky enough to have access to is corporate sponsored back-up childcare. Children aged three months through twelve years are served in back-up care when their regular care arrangements break down. However, this article will focus on infants and toddlers and their experiences in back-up childcare. Those parents who are employed by family friendly companies which provide their employees with the benefit of back-up childcare are fortunate in that they are able to utilize a program which is educational, fun, meets the needs of their young children and is close to their place of employment. In addition, back-up childcare can be the safe haven needed by all children where they form special, long term relationships with caregivers who are skilled nurturers. It is through these relationships that resilience is fostered.

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About Back-Up Childcare

According to Hilliard, (1985) quality care is that which is: well-planned and organized, encourages parental involvement, safeguards the health and safety of children, occurs within adequate physical space, provides ample equipment for learning, and is staffed by individuals trained in child development and teaching methods appropriate for use with young children. As an Educational Director in a back-up childcare center, owned by Children**First**, Inc. I consider myself lucky to be a part of a caring community of educators who take pride in their work surrounding young children. At the same time, the task of making a difference in children's lives, one child at a time, is taken very seriously. Our company's motto is, "Every child is unique, precious and unrepeatable." By following through on this motto, each and every teacher ensures that each and every child has a successful experience at the center. At Children**First** centers all of Hilliard's principles are routinely put into practice. There is a significantly lower rate of turnover of staff in Children**First** centers as compared to other day care centers and they are accredited by NAEYC. Low staff turnover is a factor in building resilience in young children, as we will see later. In my opinion, the staff does not leave due to the special feeling of belonging and community, which our " Human Qualities Initiative" fosters. Our community has identified five essential human qualities deemed necessary to be a successful educator of young children. They are: perseverance, optimism, tolerance, commitment, and patience. The purposefulness employed in practicing these qualities during every day interactions with each other, the children and families is but one way that resilience is fostered by the staff in the young children that visit the center.

Another important factor that aids in the process of fostering resilience is the special relationship formed between child and caregiver. For many infants and toddlers, visiting a back-up center is their first experience in group care. The low staff to child ratios found in back-up care aid in the process of forming a close, meaningful relationship between child and teacher. In the infant room, the ratio is 1:1 for infants under six months and 1:2 for those over six months. In the toddler room, the ratio is 1:3 for toddlers under two years and 1:4 for those between two and three years of age. The bond formed between these children and their first teachers often grows into a meaningful relationship that lasts throughout their childhood. Many children begin to use the center during infancy and continue visiting during school holidays and summer vacations up until their thirteenth birthday. It is not uncommon for them to consult and confide in that first teacher met so long ago. This is due to the fact that the center is viewed as a safe haven where children feel comfortable and secure in their surroundings. They also find security and a sense of worth just knowing that there is a special person who truly cares about their well-being and success whom they can visit periodically during the course of their childhood.

To many in the field of Early Care and Education, back-up childcare may be viewed as a stressful disruption that could interfere with attachment and be detrimental to continuity of care. This article will attempt to prove that quality back-up childcare actually fosters the development of resiliency in young children by providing them with a positive experience and opportunity to successfully cope when faced with a challenging disruption in their usual routine. As a result, when children are faced with more difficult adverse challenges later on in life, they are not devastated but actually learn and grow

stronger due to their past success in a mildly stressful situation. "While we live, or try to live in a comfort zone where life is stable and predictable, many times we experience adversity, challenges, and other events that prompt us to leave the comfort zone. We will be disrupted by these events if we have not successfully dealt with them in the past" (Richardson & Nixon, 1997).

Review of the Literature on Resilience

According to the research reviewed, resilience refers to the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or sustained life stress (Werner, 1984). Resilience is also referred to as the ability to respond actively and positively to life conditions, stress, and trauma in such a way that we are able to bounce back and continue to approach life with positive actions (Christiansen & Christiansen, 1997). Furthermore, resilience is the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances (Rouse, 1998). Joseph (1994) goes on to say that a resilient individual is one who is responsible, positive, self-reliant, committed, and socially skillful and that resilience refers to the individual's ability to adjust and adapt to the changes, demands, and disappointments that come up in the course of life. In addition to self-esteem, an individual also needs resilience, the glue that keeps us functioning when we are confronted with life's misfortunes or challenges. It is the attitudes, coping behaviors, and personal strength that is seen in people who manage adversity and adjust well to the changes demanded of them by their life circumstances. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from a bad or difficult situation (Joseph, 1994). Another component of resiliency is an individual's competence and successful adaptation in the face of

significant adversity, such as biological risk factors or stressful life events. In this context, resiliency represents a state or characteristic within the individual (Letourneau, 1997). The often repeated documentation of the idea of resiliency or the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks, has clearly established the self-righting nature of human development. As educators, we must move beyond the heavy emphasis that has been placed on risk factors and problems faced by children and come to understand that stresses are part of children's lives in order to facilitate the creation of the conditions that will facilitate healthy development (Benard, 1993).

Several protective factors within the individual or the environment that reduce the negative impact of stressful situations and problems have been identified throughout the research done so far on the topic of resilience. These include: a caring environment, positive expectations, internal locus of control, autonomy, sociability, and the ability to form positive relationships with others (Benard, 1993, Henderson, 1998 & Rouse, 1998). The most important protective factor which will be the main focus of the literature review is the fact that most resilient children establish a close bond with at least one caregiver from whom they received lots of attention during the first year of life (Werner, 1984). According to Werner, (1984) early childhood programs and a favorite teacher can act as an important buffer against adversity in the lives of resilient young children. Furthermore, a favorite teacher can become an important model of identification for a resilient child whose own home is plagued by conflict or dissolution (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980 in Werner 1984).

The early unconditional love of a nurturing adult, who becomes an important role model for the child, helps the child develop a basic sense of trust (Joseph, 1994). Werner (1990) acknowledges that only a few studies have been done related to the role of teachers as protective buffers in the lives of children who overcome adversity. However, she found that among the most frequently encountered positive role model in the lives of children, outside of the family circle, was a favorite teacher. For the resilient child, a special teacher was so much more than an instructor of academic skills, but also served as a confidant and positive role model for personal identification (Werner, 1990). According to Kidder's findings, a good teacher can give a child at least a chance to feel. "She thinks I'm worth something; maybe I am" (1990). It seems almost impossible to successfully overcome adversity without the presence of a trusting relationship, even with a single adult that says, "you matter" (Henderson, 1998).

In order to foster resilience, those adults responsible for the care and education of young children must encourage, support and focus on their strengths, or "islands of competence." Psychologist Julius Segal referred to such adults as "charismatic," noting that from them, children gather strength. Segal goes even further to say that, "we must never underestimate the power of even one adult to guide a child's life in a more positive direction" (1998). There is a special need to strengthen informal support for those children and families in our communities which appear most vulnerable because they lack, either temporarily or permanently, some of the essential social bonds that appear to buffer stress. One such group needing this support is working mothers of young children with no provisions for stable child care.

Putting it All Together

The past research has clearly made a case for the validity and importance of fostering resilience as well as the need for more quality alternatives when it comes to child care. It is my opinion that these two seemingly unrelated topics actually go hand in hand. That is where back-up childcare enters the scene. The structure of back-up childcare is such that it tends to contain and promote many of the protective factors, suggested by the research to foster a sense of resilience in young children. According to Rutter, (1984) children need to become adaptable. He goes on to cite a study which looked at how the stress of a hospital admission affected young children and found that those who had previously had happy separation experiences such as staying overnight with friends, being cared for by a grandparent or good babysitter did better than those with no such experiences. This reference can be compared to the experience a child has when attending a back-up childcare center.

Ten parents of infants and toddlers who have attended a back-up childcare center in an urban area were asked to complete a questionnaire which contained some general questions pertaining to the age of their child, number of times the child has attended back-up and the other options available to parents when there is a breakdown in their regular childcare. Specific questions regarding personality traits found in resilient children were also asked. When asked if they believed that their child had received a higher quality of care in back-up childcare as opposed to one of their other options, such as a neighbor or babysitter, all parents agreed on the fact that their child was more stimulated and happier in the center. In addition, all parents of children who had visited the center more than five times felt that their child possessed such resilient characteristics

as: having a strong attachment to one caregiver, being active, tolerant and cooperative as well as having high self-esteem. Overall, these parents believed that their child's experience in a back-up childcare center aided in the process of building resilience. The one major factor cited by parents as being responsible for that process was the special relationship formed between the child and teacher.

It is undeniable that the initial experience is usually stressful and upsetting for many infants and toddlers. However, once they get past that minor disruption, they usually are successful in adjusting to the new environment due to the quality of care provided and therefore have come one step closer to becoming resilient children as a result of being able to negotiate a minor stressor in their young lives. It is inevitable that at some point in their lives, children will have to leave the comfort zone. At that time, they will be disrupted by the events leading to that departure if they have not successfully dealt with them in the past. Therefore, back-up childcare lays the foundation for the ability to manage future difficulties or disruptions that are bound to be part of life. Werner (1984) firmly believes that early childhood programs and a favorite teacher can act as an important buffer against adversity in the lives of young children.

Implications for the Future

While some experts worry about the ethics of infants and toddlers spending so much time in child care programs, the reality is that nearly half of all mothers of infants younger than one year of age work outside of the home (NAEYC, 1987). If there are no quality alternatives available to these working mothers as well as other families in need of care for their very young children, we as educators must ask ourselves where they will

go. According to NAEYC, (1987) those providing care for infants and toddlers include: "wonderful grammas, nannies and other fine caregivers in some cases, while in other cases, not-so-hot sitters whose role it would sometimes seem, is to sit, often with eyes glued to the one-eyed electronic babysitter of the babysitter." Therefore, it seems that we must acknowledge the reality faced by children and families, regardless of our cherished beliefs surrounding attachment and begin to place a heavier emphasis on quality child care. When the term "child care" is used, it not only refers to primary care but also to the often neglected concept of alternative care for when that primary care falls through. Society has been abuzz with the recent push for quality child care to be available to all young children. In my opinion, we need to widen that spectrum to include care that replaces the usual every day care received by children. Shouldn't there be quality alternatives available to families that provide care which meets the needs of children just as well as their regular environment? If children encounter people who give meaning to their lives and a reason for commitment and caring, they will be able to successfully negotiate both the minor and major difficulties presented to them during the course of their childhood and on into adulthood. In general, resilience is linked to a sense of optimism, ownership and personal control. By believing in children and providing opportunities for them to gain proficiency in their islands of competencies and feelings of self-worth, we are making the most of a wonderful gift, which is actually our legacy to the next generation (Brooks, 1998).

Conclusion

The future of our nation is interwoven with the future of children. It is our responsibility as teachers, caregivers, educators, parents and advocates for young children to ensure that today's children are prepared to assume the responsibilities of family, community and the nation in the next generation. The government and society in general have created programs to support children, schools to educate children as well as laws to protect children but none of this matters if individual children are not given the chance to reach their fullest potentials or are not supported adequately as they learn to effectively deal with the challenges that face them during their daily lives (Redlener, 1994 in Joseph, 1994).

The challenge faced by those of us responsible for the development of tomorrow's adults is to promote those characteristics associated with resilience in the children under our care. One needs to keep in mind that there is a shifting balance between stressful life events which heighten children's vulnerability and the protective factors in their lives which enhance their resiliency. This balance can change with each stage of the life cycle and also with the sex of the child. When the stressful life events outweigh the protective factors, even the most resilient child can develop problems. Those responsible for the care and education of young children can help to restore this balance, either by decreasing the child's exposure to intense or chronic life stresses, or by increasing the number of protective factors such as competencies and sources of support (Werner, 1984).

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